

THE CRÉOLE LANGUAGE

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tions to the English language in the southern United States, where they were slaves for seventy years longer than in Haiti.

Common African economic ways yielded to the plantation system and slavery; the Negroes had no opportunity to govern themselves or settle their own disputes; they mated rather than married; their families might be broken up if the master wished to sell a slave. The one part of life in which they were permitted to follow unhindered their African ways was the intimate one of religion which, since it needed no buildings or organization, did not interfere with work, and could be entirely personal and private, was not suppressed. As has been pointed out, the Dahomean form of religion prevailed over all others and, modified, gained wide adherence among the slaves. It is precisely in Vodun that Créole has taken over its only important African words, such as Vodun, zombi, houngan, marassa, loa, houmfort, bocor, ouanga.

It would be erroneous to imply that the Negroes had no effect upon the language of which they soon became the predominant users.⁶ Their operations were of a subtle sort, however. As with the Negroes of the United States, the letter "r" proved difficult, and often disappeared altogether, leaving many words softly slurred. "Marcher," for example, generally sounds as if it were *ma'ché*. Likewise in the course of years they gave the language their own accent, their own modulation and tone, which make Créole sound different on their lips from a white man's way of speaking it. Some scholars attribute this to a racial influence—that is, to the morphology of the Negro throat and tongue. It might be pointed out to the contrary that Americans, white like the English, have given the mother tongue *their* own accent, modulation, and tone. It has certainly not yet been proved that race has anything to do with speech.

Words in imitation of a sound grow up in every language. Several western African dialects, especially Mandingue, seemed fond of onomatopoeia; in Haiti, consequently, one hears many an expressive additional word. Moreau de Saint-Méry⁷ noticed this in colonial Saint-Domingue, citing such cases as the addition of "bap" to the verb "tomber," if one had fallen down lightly, or "boum" if heavily;

6. Suzanne Sylvain, *Le Créole haïtien* (Wetteren, Belgium, 1936), p. 10, says that although the African contribution to Haitian Créole is generally considered to be slight, she has personally found 170 words of undeniable African origin, and feels sure that there are many more.

7. *Description ... de ... Saint-Domingue*, II, 36-37.

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